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Bay Area lawmakers urge patience on Iraq

IN CONGRESS: BUSH WANTS AUTHORITY TO REMOVE WEAPONS, SADDAM HUSSEIN

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration Thursday formally asked Congress to authorize military force against Iraq, calling for a swift and strong message of America's resolve to remove weapons of mass destruction from the rogue nation and oust its leader, Saddam Hussein.

While Congress probably will narrow the broad authority sought by the White House, the measure is expected to pass in the coming weeks with wide bipartisan support. But little of that support will come from the Bay Area.

Just as with the Persian Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, the region's delegation is almost unanimous in its opposition to military action without first more aggressively pursuing diplomatic solutions.

Reps. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, and Lynn Woolsey, D-Santa Rosa, said they oppose giving any president a ``blank check'' to go to war. They share concerns with others in Congress that the language of the resolution is far too vague and gives President Bush almost unlimited authority to use military force.

And several Bay Area representatives -- including Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose, as well as Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer -- argue that there is not yet evidence of any imminent threat from Iraq. They want to first see if Iraq allows U.N. weapons inspectors unfettered ability to comb the country for evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

``Until they exhaust diplomatic channels and in the absence of any world support from any of our allies, I can think of no reason to go after Hussein except to satisfy the American oil companies, and that's hardly worth risking American lives for," said Rep. Pete Stark, D-Fremont, who voted against using force in 1991 and will oppose it again.

Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, who was the only member of Congress to vote against the resolution authorizing military retaliation for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, said a pre-emptive U.S. strike would ``set a terrible international precedent." She will introduce a competing resolution calling on the United States to work through the United Nations and use ``other peaceful means" to ensure Iraq is not developing weapons of mass destruction. But Stark predicted that only 50 to 75 members of the 435-member House would support that approach.

Bay Area resistance

While the Bay Area is home to the largest concentration of anti-war sentiment in Congress, it also has one of the strongest supporters of taking on Iraq. Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, a Holocaust survivor who fought Nazi Germany and later the Soviet Union as part of the underground resistance movement in his native Hungary, is leading the charge among Democrats to back Bush's request for the ability to use military force.

``War is a terrible thing. I know it well," Lantos told Secretary of State Colin Powell during a congressional hearing on Iraq on Thursday. ``Sometimes, as in the second world war, there is no other way to do what

is best for humanity."

The White House on Thursday sent Congress a proposed resolution that would grant Bush authority "to use all means that he determines to be appropriate" to enforce U.N. resolutions, defend the United States against threats from Iraq and "to restore international peace and security in the region." The Bush administration has argued that Saddam's government presents "a grave and gathering danger" because it has attempted to develop weapons of mass destruction.

"If you want to keep the peace, you've got to have the authorization to use force," Bush told reporters after a meeting with Powell on Thursday morning.

Later in the day, before the House International Relations Committee, Powell said the United States could not risk the threat of Saddam developing nuclear weapons to either use himself or supply to terrorists.

U.S. undeterred

A strong vote from Congress authorizing force would aid the Bush administration in its attempt to win a new resolution from the U.N. Security Council that is backed by the threat of military action, Powell said. But both he and the president made clear yesterday that the United States would not be deterred if its diplomatic efforts failed.

"The United Nations Security Council must show backbone, must step up and hold this regime to account," Bush said. "Otherwise, the United States and some of our friends will do so."

Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., said he believes "the American people have faith in this president . . . and I think they support the maximum flexibility for this president."

There is evidence that the president's stance is gaining popular support. A poll released Thursday by the Pew Research Center found that Americans, by 52 to 37 percent, thought Bush had explained clearly the need for action against Iraq; a 30-point swing from just a month earlier. Larger numbers of Americans favored military action even if allies didn't agree and if there were major casualties.

But Feinstein said she had "some major concerns" with the broad authority the White House is requesting and predicted that the Democratic-controlled Senate would find language to limit Bush's ability to act.

"I believe we ought to have a little patience. There is no imminent threat. If arms inspectors can go in without restriction, why wouldn't we try to do that without authorizing force?" she said. Feinstein said she would support the use of force if unfettered weapons inspections were not possible.

Many of her Bay Area colleagues echoed Feinstein's view that the Bush administration had yet to prove why Iraq needs to be attacked now.

"It's up to the administration to put the meat on the bones," said Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto. She said she was "stunned" when administration officials told her in a classified briefing there was no direct, imminent threat to the United States from Iraq.

Republicans in Congress strongly support Bush, and Democratic leaders have indicated in recent days that they will not block a resolution from coming to a quick vote in the next couple of weeks.

Rep. Sam Farr, D-Salinas, said he would prefer for Congress to vote on Iraq after the Nov. 5 elections, to remove politics from the issue. But he said party leaders don't want the issue to hang over the elections, in which control of both houses of Congress is at stake.

"I think the Democratic leadership sincerely believes if they get this issue behind them they can get back on the domestic agenda and they can defeat the president's party in the polls in November," said Farr, who was among about 20 representatives at a news conference Thursday opposing military action against Iraq. ``I've found from town hall meetings this vote is just going to create more unrest because it creates more uncertainty."

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